

# THEORY OF RUIN – HYLOGRAPHY





- the clouds take on shapes almost recognizable
- the waves on the shore offer smooth gestures in the sand
- the gravestone inscription weathers such that it appears to have lost all form ... but not quite

This is **hylography** – the process of emergence and disappearance, intentional or unintentional, of graphical form out of matter.

– viewing an illuminated manuscript, we are drawn to the imagery and form of the letters, as much as what they say

– the artist Jasper Johns incorporates letters and numbers in his work so that they lose their referential context and become things-in-themselves

This is **hylography** – when text and graphic are experienced as material forms freed from intended signification and reference.

(*hyle* – Aristotle’s word for matter; *graphein* is to write, to make a signifying mark, to draw)

My thoughts yesterday about hylography, inspired by my work with Paul Noble [Link], are lingering.

There’s something in the phenomenon that concerns ruin – the way form dissolves, and the implications. [Link – some thoughts on the theory of ruin]

Then there’s Peirce’s version of semiotics.

An **icon** is a sign that is linked to its represented object by some shared quality. A drawing of a car may look like it.

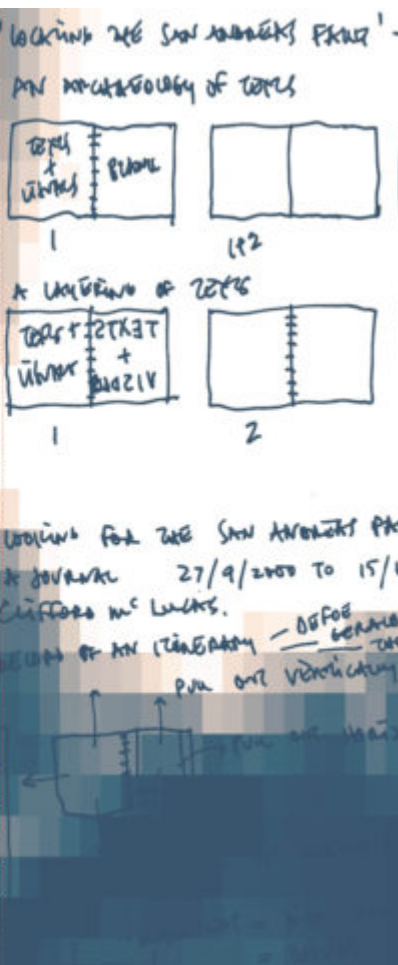
An **index** is a sign that is linked to its object by an actual connection or real relation (irrespectively of interpretation). A finger points; smoke billows and tells us there is fire.

A **symbol** represents its denoted object by virtue of an interpretive habit or rule that is independent of any shared physical quality or contextual relationship with that which it denotes. The written word and sound “stone” has no intrinsic relation to any actual stone or to the substance.

Hylography interrupts these sign-object relationships. In particular hylography works on and with indexicality. This is a phenomenon far broader than language because it involves material connections. And performativity: the way something is

said, done, written, can carry considerable significance and force, independent of the meaning or reference of what is said or written.

HIS/DECISION/TO/QUOTE/KEEP A JOURNAL END QUOTE WAS ON THE FACE OF IT A SIMPLE AFFAIR, BUT/PAUSE/BUT THE/KEEPING/OF/A JOURNAL WAS NOT THE SAME AS THE WRITING OF A BOOK STOP /IT EXCITED HIM/THAT/THE/JOURNAL COULD BE EXTREMELY OPENENDED AND MIGHT INCLUDE TEXTS/PAUSE DRAWINGS/PAUSE/MATERIALS TAKEN FROM MAGAZINES OR NEWSPAPERS/PAUSE TRANSCRIPTS OF CONVERSATIONS/PAUSE/PERSONAL MATERIALS AS WELL AS MORE PUBLIC PRONOUNCEMENTS/AND/SO/ON/STOP/AND/HE WONDERED/WHETHER THE DEVELOPMENT OF DIGITAL METHODS/OF/ COLLECTING AND PROCESSING/MATERIALS AS WELL AS THE REMARKABLE LEAP IN THE OUTPUT/QUALITY/OF/EASILY AVAILABLE/COLOR/PRINTERS MIGHT NOW ALLOW A NEW KIND/OF/PUBLISHING PROJECT TO TAKE/PLACE/STOP/THE GATEKEEPER PUBLISHING HOUSES MIGHT HAVE ENORMOUS DIFFICULTIES/DASH/BOTH/FINANCIAL AND CONCEPTUAL/TO/DO WITH THE KIND OF BOOK HE WAS IMAGINING/BUT/PAUSE/THE MORE HE THOUGHT ABOUT IT/PAUSE THE MORE HIS DECISION EXCITED HIM/STOP/AND/SO/HE WOULD/PHYSICALLY/CONSTRUCT A BOOK STOP A ONE OFF STOP A UNIQUE/OR/IF/STOP NEW/PARAGRAPH/BUT/THE/FORMAT FOR THIS VOLUME WOULD HAVE TO BE THOUGHT/ABOUT/CAREFULLY/PAUSE/AND/DETERMINED ACCORDING TO/PAUSE WHAT WERE FOR HIM/PAUSE ALIEN/AMERICAN PAPER/SIZES/PAUSE/THE AVAILABLE TECHNIQUES OF BINDING AND SO ON/STOP/HE DECIDED/THAT/HE WOULD/WORK/WITH/THE BIGGEST SIZES THAT THE PRINTER THAT WAS AVAILABLE/TO/HIM COULD/HANDLE/DASH/THIRTEEN INCHES BY NINETEEN INCHES STOP IN HIS USE OF/THIS PAPER THE SWITCH/FROM/PORTRAIT TO LANDSCAPE GENERATED AN OVERLAPPED COMMON SQUARE AREA/FOR/HIS/DAILY/TEXTS OF THIRTEEN INCHES BY THIRTEEN INCHES STOP AN/PAUSE HIS BELOVED/NUMBER/THIRTEEN AGAIN/STOP HE DETERMINED THAT/PAUSE IF POSSIBLE/PAUSE HE WOULD ALSO/USE/A LONGER SHEET CALLED/PAUSE IN AMERICA QUOTE BANNER PAPER END QUOTE/STOP/PAUSE WOULD ALLOW HIM SIGNIFICANTLY TO EXTEND HIS BASIC FORMAT UPWARDS/PAUSE DOWNWARDS/AND TO THE READERS RIGHT IN ORDER TO CREATE LONG FOLIO/PANORAMAS STOP RESEARCH INTO BINDING METHODS LED HIM TO THE CONCLUSION THAT THE JOURNAL WOULD NEED TO BE IN THREE PARTS/DASH/BOOKS ONE OF THREE/PAUSE TWO OF THREE AND THREE OF THREE STOP THESE THREE BOOKS WOULD RESULT IN VOLUMES THAT WERE APPROXIMATELY THIRTEEN INCHES HIGH BY TWENTY TWO INCHES WIDE AND ONE AND A HALF INCHES THICK STOP HE WAS SUDDENLY SURPRISED TO REALISE THAT THIS SIZE FITTED PERFECTLY INTO THE CHEAP PLASTIC SHOPPING BAGS HE HAD PURCHASED BACK IN WALES WHICH HE HAD USED AS HIS LUGGAGE FOR THE TRIP TO CALIFORNIA AND WAS ALSO USING IN HIS OFFICE AS DOCUMENT STORAGE UNITS STOP/NOT HERE MAY LAUGH/PAUSE BUT HE WAS DELIGHTED BY THE HAPPY COINCIDENCE/STOP/ENDS



A book in a room; page detail. Cliff McLucas for the Three Landscapes Project 2001.



Jasper Johns, 0 through 9



Thomas Percy, *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*, 1765. Pages are blown in the wind; buildings fall in ruin, but the song of the poet endures.